

CAI CC

-73 C11

Government  
Publications

*Canada*

The Canada Council  
Conseil des Arts du Canada

THE CANADA COUNCIL  
AND TRANSLATION

*General publications 36-7*

English adaptation of a speech  
given at the convention  
of the Association of Translators  
and Interpreters of Ontario,  
November 17, 1973

By Claude Gauthier,  
Assistant Director and Secretary,  
Canada Council



Some while ago a small knot of translators was pondering how to put into French this message for railroad passengers: "Smoking is permitted in this car." After weighing the pros and cons of different versions, one of them had a bright idea. "Why put up anything at all?" he said. "A French-Canadian who feels like smoking isn't going to wait for written permission."

The point of the story may be that the translator must beware of a blind faith in the original text. The solution to certain translation problems might be not to translate at all! In general, though, it's probably wiser to make at least some attempt to translate the original, if only to appease the author's pride. What's more, one shudders to think what would happen if all the translators in the public service suddenly decided to abandon translation altogether. It would certainly deal a low blow to the federal government's efforts to promote bilingualism. I won't even mention what it might do to multiculturalism, that glowing object in the sky that's so hard to identify.

I am glad to be here with you tonight, since I have an announcement to make on the Council's behalf that is of special interest to those of you who have done or would like to do literary translation. The Council has decided to inaugurate annual prizes worth \$2,500 each for the two translations, English and French, which are judged to be the year's best. The award-winning books will be chosen among the Canadian works published during the preceding year, and all books of literary value will be eligible for the prize: fiction, poetry, plays, essays, travel, history, biography, etc.



Two 3-member juries, now being formed, will have as a first responsibility to locate and read all the literary translations published in Canada this year. We hope to be able to announce the names of the two first winners next March or April. The awarding of the prizes will of course be given wide publicity.

Through this prize the Council hopes to focus attention on the increasing importance of literary translation in Canada and also to encourage translators of exceptional talent. I hope, and even expect, to see among future winners members of the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario, since your association has always been in the forefront of translation in Canada. At the risk of offending your collective modesty, I would go so far as to say that you count among your members some of the best translators in the country. Noblesse oblige!

There is nothing new about the Council's interest in translation. For many years now we have been making grants to publishers for the translation of works by Canadian authors. This assistance, however, was fairly marginal, since publishers rarely had enough money to think about getting involved in translations, and the Council lacked funds to give them substantial encouragement.

The situation began to improve in 1972 when the federal government, through the Department of the Secretary of State, adopted a publishing policy to ease the crisis in Canadian publishing. The Council was asked to carry out certain parts of this new policy and with the infusion of funds was able to broaden its assistance. In 1970-71 the Council's aid to publication in the arts and literature and in the humanities and social

sciences was \$800,000; in 1972-73 it had risen to more than \$2,660,000. During this period the Council extended its aid to include certain categories of books which were previously ineligible for grants and added two new aspects to its program: block grants to publishers and the purchase and free distribution of books. For the current fiscal year (1973-74) the budgets for these two projects are \$750,000 and \$550,000 respectively. A separate budget has been set up for assistance to translation (it was formerly merged with aid to publishing) and through it \$225,000 is earmarked for translation for the current fiscal year.

The new program is described in a recently published brochure called Aid to Publication and Translation/Aide à l'édition et à la traduction, which you can obtain on request. According to the brochure, grants may be given for the translation of all categories of books, except textbooks, from one official language to the other. Applications must be made by majority Canadian-owned publishing houses and translators must be Canadians or landed immigrants of one year's standing. In exceptional cases the Council may also support a French or English translation of a literary work written in a foreign language but by a Canadian author.

Council grants for translation have so far enabled Canadians who speak only one language to become familiar with the work of such authors as Jacques Godbout, Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan, Hubert Aquin, Roch Carrier, Mordecai Richler, Anne Hébert and many others. I said "who speak only one language", but there are also bilingual people who sometimes prefer to read a good translation rather than the original work. Right now I myself am reading Jean Paré's translation of the biography of Dr. Norman Bethune, the great Canadian physician who became a legendary hero in China, but is still relatively



unknown in Quebec although he worked there for many years. It's an engrossing book, a perfect example of "invisible" translation, and it will no doubt help to remedy the situation.

You have to admire the virtuosity of a translator who, like Jean Paré, can manage to express in French the complexity, the aggressiveness and the paradoxes of Marshall McLuhan's work, or who, like Alan Brown, can capture in English the stylistic intricacies of a novel such as Hubert Aquin's Trou de mémoire. As for poetry, Robert Frost defined it as "what is lost in translation", but who would dispute the poetic qualities of Frank Scott's translation of Anne Hébert's Tombeau des rois. Basically it's all a question of talent: the translator must himself possess all the qualities of a good writer if he is to act as a medium between the writer and his readers.

Now humour, it seems to me, presents special difficulties for the translator. Some witty phrases just can't be translated. In these cases, it's probably better, as I said earlier, not to translate at all. Something else must be substituted. Our former director, the late Peter Dwyer, used to embroider the texts he wrote for our annual report with witticisms. He once used the following phrase to underline that opera can survive only in large cities: "You can have roses round the cottage door or Der Rosenkavalier, but you can't have both in the same place". But roses and cottages just don't have the same evocative power in French, so the translator came up with this image: "If faut choisir entre Carmen et le taureau!" (Literally, you have to choose between Carmen and the bull). If we carry the metaphor one step further, Carmen could symbolize the freedom and spontaneity of art and the bull would be patient, plodding workmanship. In other words, and I'll end

on this, the translator who ventures into the literary "arena" must be ready to enfold in the same embrace both Carmen and the bull.



3 1761 11465596 2